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AUTHOR Hopkins, Willard; Crain, Kay
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ABSTRACT

Efforts to increase academic expectations and improve the school climate at Fairfield (Ohio) High School have resulted in a record high in ACT test scores, a decrease in failure and dropout rates, and a dramatic increase in attendance as well as in the percentage of students taking foreign languages, math, and science. Some policy changes implemented by the administration include: the elimination of early dismissal for seniors not involved in vocational work-study programs, an increased emphasis on homework, and involvement of parents in their child's scheduling conference. The school also developed a core curriculum for college-bound students and created a system for recognizing student academic achievement. Changes in school climate were effected by including students in decision-making processes with regard to areas that affected them: academics, discipline, student leadership roles, extracurricular participation, food service changes, initiation of community service, and public recognition for student achievements. The key to success at Fairfield seems to be a commitment of administration, staff, and students to work together toward an effective school. (TE)

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SUMMARY

SCHOOL CLIMATE: THE KEY TO AN EFFECTIVE SCHOOL

PRESENTERS: WILLARD HOPKINS, PRINCIPAL
KAY CRAIN, ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL

Fairfield High School reports they just scored the highest on the ACT test in the past ten years. The percentage of the high school taking foreign language has increased from 15% to 40%, the percentage of students taking math increased from 51% to 85%, and the science enrollment increased from 47% to 70%. Attendance is the highest in fifteen years. Failure rates have decreased and the dropout rate has been cut in half.

Willard Hopkins, principal of Fairfield High School in Butler County, Ohio, and Kay Crain, assistant principal, report that these results come from an increase in the academic expectations as well as the efforts made to improve the school climate at Fairfield.

Changes in the academic expectations include a commitment by the administration and the staff, elimination of early dismissal, homework was emphasized and a standard set, scheduling was changed to include parents, counselors were made responsible for an appropriate schedule for each student, a core curriculum was developed for college prep students, students were recognized for academic achievement.

Changes in school climate were made by including students in decision making processes that affected them. Eight areas were identified where student involvement resulted in significant changes. These areas were academics, discipline, student leadership roles, extracurricular participation, food service changes, initiation of community service and public recognition for student achievements. Establishment of meaningful senior activities has resulted in students leaving their high school feeling good about what goes on at Fairfield High School.

The key to their success seems to be a commitment of the administration, staff, and students to work together to have an effective school.

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NASSP
1985

SCHOOL CLIMATE: THE KEY TO AN EFFECTIVE SCHOOL

Fairfield High School is a typical suburban school outside Cincinnati, Ohio, in an area that experienced rapid population growth in the seventies. The population of Fairfield in 1970 was 13,000. The population in 1980 was 30,000.

Fairfield High School has 1,450 students in grades 10 through 12. Eighty teachers give us a staff ratio of eighteen to one. The average class is twenty-five with a range of ten to thirty-eight. The student population is 98% white. It is largely a middle class school and community. Probably one of the unique things about our school is we start the day with the National Anthem and most of the kids don't have locks on their lockers.

We are a pretty typical school and community. We were doing the same things everyone else was during the seventies including elective programs in most areas and arena scheduling to let the kids take whatever they wanted.

Tracking our ACT scores through the seventies showed the same declining trend as the state and national results. Then in 1977, the state and national declines stopped and we did not. We went up in 1978, but in 1979 we dropped below the state norm. Many schools have results like those shown below. (See Chart 1.) Many high school principals have met with their superintendent and/or their board of education about results like ours.

As early as 1978, we began to study the problem. We met with each academic department to brainstorm with teachers about what they felt was causing the low scores. Out of those meetings came a commitment to improve our academic climate. A number of suggestions were made by teachers on things that could be done to change our academic emphasis. The following year, faculty committes were formed at the suggestion of staff members to study and make recommendations on all the

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areas they felt needed study. The areas we looked at were discipline, drugs, early dismissal, master schedule, course selection process, course offerings, extracurricular activities, and academic standards.

The first major change made as a result of the committee recommendations was to eliminate early dismissal. We had been letting a large number of seniors out of school two hours early in order to work. We stopped letting anyone out early except for vocational work study students.

Homework was emphasized. We had fought a losing battle during the seventies over homework. Our kids understood Gandhi and passive resistance before the movie came out. They had continued to do as little as possible until the teachers reached the place that most homework was done in class or not done at all. In an early meeting we had with our top one hundred ranked students, they told us they spent a half hour to an hour on homework if they did any at all. A standard for homework was established. We expected the teachers to assign a half hour per night for each academic subject.

Following a North Central Evaluation and recommendations, we changed our scheduling procedures. We dropped the arena scheduling. We had a scheduling conference in which the counselor met with each student and his parent to make out the student's schedule. The first year we required the parents to come in for the conference. After that we just encouraged them to come. Last year, 90% of the freshman parents came to be part of the conference.

We insisted on students developing a four-year plan. We made counselors responsible to see that students were correctly placed and taking an appropriate schedule. We developed a core curriculum that we strongly recommended to all students. We required that all students take two years of science and math even though we didn't change the requirement for graduation. We also developed a college prep plan that included four years of English, three years of math,

three years of science, three years of social studies, and two years of foreign language. We were greatly helped when the state adopted that plan statewide for regular admittance to college. Their publicity helped us emphasize our plan to our parents and students.

We reviewed our curriculum in every subject area. Changes were made in English, math, science, and social studies. The only change we made that required board of education action was the increase of a partial credit in social studies for graduation. We did not raise the number of credits required for graduation.

We looked for ways to encourage and recognize students for academic achievement. We instituted the five point "A" for honor courses and we added additional honors courses. We started publicizing the honor roll.

These changes began to have an impact on the academic climate. However, we soon learned that there is more to school climate than academic climate. Kay Crain joined the administrative team at the high school in 1980. She recognized that we did not have a positive school climate.

According to Dr. Edgar Kelly, professor of administration, curriculum, and instruction at the University of Nebraska, school climate refers to the social environment formed by norms, beliefs, and attitudes that are reflected in conditions, events, and practices of a particular environment.[1]

The administration and the faculty had made changes that were to have an academic effect on the students and the school. This group recognized that certain academic as well as disciplinary changes must be made. However, in making those decisions for changes, the students had been left out of any decision making process. The students had the feeling that things had been done to them and not for them. These changes were viewed as punishment. And, few truly understood the intent. Examples of these changes were: (1) academic

expectations were established, (2) homework was increased, (3) final exams were instituted, (4) discipline became more strict, (5) early dismissal was abolished, and (6) "so-called" senior privileges were taken away.

There should be no doubt that the changes that the faculty and the administration made were for the benefit of the students, however, in this change the school climate was to suffer. Even an outsider could see a lack of interest in school, an "I don't care" attitude, a lack of pride and spirit in the student body.

In the spring of 1981, a commitment was made by the administration to effect a change in the school climate. We began by meeting on a regular basis with the Principal's Cabinet and the Student Council. We asked one main question: "What could we do to make a positive change in the attitude of the students at Fairfield High School?" After many discussions the students felt that an impact in the spring of the year would set the tone for the up-coming school year. Their suggestions were these: (1) to set academic standards for student leaders, (2) to give training to elected leaders/sponsors, and (3) to set expectations and goals for the 1981-82 year.

As a result of setting academic standards, for those students running for a class office a 2.00 GPA must be maintained and minimum credit requirements for each grade were established. Thus, the election process would not allow a non-senior to be the class president or an underclassman to be homecoming queen. In reflecting student attitudes, student leaders should have good grades, leaders should be identified as positive students in their class, and elections would take on the look as being serious, not just a game that was to be played.

To further increase student participation and involvement, in the fall of 1981-82, committees were set up outside the Principal's Cabinet and the Student Council. The class council concept was developed. Sixty members from each

class were selected by the faculty, class officers, sponsors, and the administration to assist the class officers in making decisions that would effect the class. Again, regular meetings were held with committees within these class councils to discuss issues and make suggestions.

Nick Billett, the president of the class of '82, and his officers set goals and expectations for not only the senior class but also for the rest of the student body. At the senior class assembly, Nick spoke to the seniors about the goals, expectations and responsibilities that went along with being a senior. He explained to them the role they would have in making a positive change in the school climate at Fairfield High School. He also spoke to the junior class and sophomore class in their class assemblies. What he relayed to them was that there was going to be a change at Fairfield High School, and with the leadership of the seniors, students would feel pride and a renewed spirit in their school. Nick also explained to them that the students' actions were going to reflect that pride and promote and re-establish a positive student attitude in the community.

Those class officers and class council members further set the tone for the year by meeting with the local press and relaying to them their goals and expectations for the up-coming year. That class did accomplish its goals, with the help of the faculty, students, and the administration. New expectations were established and we saw new traditions begun.

The eight areas in which changes were made that effected the school climate were academics, discipline, leadership roles, extracurricular activities, food service, community service, special programs, scholarships, and gifts and setting new traditions and activities.

1. ACADEMICS

As previously mentioned, academic standards were set for those students

running for class office. Students would have to maintain a 2.00 GPA. Minimum credit requirements were established for each grade. Each student is re-classified at the beginning of each year.

The next areas were those that are especially important to the student's academic progress...the fact that he remain in the class and not attend an activity if the teacher feels the student can not miss class. Teachers must give other teachers a three day notice if a student is to be out of class for an activity. If that teacher feels that the student can not afford to miss the class, then the student will miss that activity.

Although 65% of our students are in college prep courses, only 50% actually attend college. This year we are targeting the group of students that do not have a post high school educational plan and they will be given the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Test. The test will be administered by the military. The test, however, will be interpreted by one of our counselors. The counselors will discuss with the students their strengths and interests in the hopes of assisting them in finding a post high school program that will be beneficial to them.

Teachers' classroom rules and grading procedures give a very clear picture of the expectations of a particular class. There is little doubt on the part of the student what is expected of him. With many of our teachers making calls to parents, it is easy to cite rules and regulations for setting improved academic or behavior standards for the student.

2. DISCIPLINE

In some areas the students felt that the discipline was too lenient; in others they were willing to make a compromise or recommend changes. The area in which they felt that discipline was too "easy" was that which involved smokers. They felt that students should have to clean up around the school

since they were creating an unpleasant atmosphere with their cigarette butts. They felt that a one day in-school suspension cleaning for the first offense and a two day in-school suspension cleaning for the second offense was reasonable. If the smoker did not learn by the third time, he should be suspended out of school. Thus, our five day out of school suspension penalty for the smoking offense was established.

In the area of detentions, we got the most suggestions - from doing away with detentions to holding them on Saturday, to making them an hour and a half long. In many instances, students wanted the punishment to be more severe. However, we were able to reach a compromise. If a student missed a detention, instead of being suspended he should have a penalty detention tacked on to the regular detention. Then if the student missed one or both of those detentions he should be suspended. Students felt like we should take into consideration a student's not being able to stay for a detention and allow him to make arrangements with the teacher or an administrator so that detention could be assigned for another time. We are presently doing that, however, if a student misses a rescheduled detention, then that student is suspended.

In the area of tardies, the students definitely felt that many times they had little control over the fact that they were tardy. In those instances, when a parent brought a student to school and accompanied him to the attendance office the student's tardy would be excused. This seemed to take care of the problem that we had when a parent would say.."It was my fault he was tardy; he shouldn't be disciplined."

The dress code has been a continual concern though not necessarily a problem on the part of the entire student body. The students agreed that reasonable rules should be followed and that if a teacher or administrator felt that a student was not appropriately dressed for school, then action would be taken.

However, it is important to note that unless a teacher or student made us aware of a situation, we often times did not know about it; therefore, we could not do anything about the situation.

3. LEADERSHIP ROLES

In-house training of leaders was provided to class officers as well as to sponsors as they wrote the purpose of their organization, developed the budget and established future plans and goals. Summer meetings were held to outline possible goals to present to the class councils. Monthly meetings were held with the class officers, sponsors, and class councils to organize and make plans for reaching their goals. Senior class officers have had breakfast meetings before school to make certain they are on target with the plans that have been made. Being a class officer means WORK and all students are involved.

Activities that involved our participation in the NASSP Leadership Week included tapping of the new National Honor Society members and their induction, shadowing a Fairfield City government official and taking an active part in the leadership in the Fairfield City Schools. Approximately fifty seniors have an opportunity to participate in city government and the city schools. Last year, this week was concluded with the National Honor Society Leadership Seminar at the Rodeway Inn. A total of one hundred eight students attended from more than twenty-two schools. The junior class gives financial support to Girls and Boys State.

4. EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Although the students at Fairfield High School were generally satisfied with the extracurricular programs, there should always be room for new clubs. These clubs should definitely have a purpose although they need not be highly structured in nature.

The new clubs at Fairfield High School that have tremendous appeal are

the Presidents Club, the National Art Honor Society, Peer Counseling, and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes.

The Presidents Club was established to bring a unity to meeting dates and to support special projects. The club meets once a quarter to re-establish meeting dates, places and times as well as to let the other presidents know what is going on in each particular club. With established dates, time, etc., students are able to be involved in more than one activity.

The National Art Honor Society was established to further recognize gifted and talented students.

Peer Counseling is a program that trains students in the areas of communication skills, the decision making process, values, and building trust levels. The counselors then may assist in counseling other students. These peer counselors have worked with many students in the Freshman School whether it be through personal contact, classroom visitations, or assisting in the scheduling information sessions.

Board games have always been a favorite with students at Fairfield High School. It is not unusual to see groups of students after school playing a particular game.

Fellowship of Christian Athletes was begun when a student said, "Can we try it?" Since a teacher was familiar with this club from his college days, he volunteered to be the sponsor. We were amazed at the number of students who do not mind staying for a FRIDAY afternoon meeting.

The International Club members have been of great assistance to our foreign exchange students. The club's latest project has been trying to organize support for the remodeling of the Statue of Liberty.

In getting the "Spirit Movement" going there were to be three key groups - Indian Spirits, yell leaders, and the mascots. In the beginning there were a

few and now they are all around - or so it seems. We had maybe fifteen members from each class in Indian Spirits, three yell leaders, and no mascots. This year there are too many Indian Spirits to count, twenty-seven yell leaders and five mascots. For the first time the Indian Spirits have money enough to buy t-shirts and game tickets for the yell leaders and mascots. In the early years, if it had not been for the support of several teachers the spirit movement may not have been successful. The cheerleaders, wrestlettes, as well as the sponsors, have also worked with the Indian Spirits to plan pep assemblies.

Money-making activities have always caused a problem for sponsors and administrators. Either the merchandise does not arrive on time or it is C.O.D. The final inventory and money never seem to match, etc.

The biggest money-maker at Fairfield High School is a dance. We have a dance after almost every home football and basketball game. The music is provided by disc jockeys. Students usually make requests to play the "top 40". Written into the contract is our request that there be no drug or alcohol related music. Our students are permitted to bring one guest. All Fairfield High students must show their identification to be admitted. It is not unusual for a group to net $400.

5. FOOD SERVICE

We all know that the food in the high school cafeteria is not home cooking. And it wasn't until students were dissatisfied with the "cardboard pizza" that changes were to take place. Menus and prices were reviewed, suggestions for changes were made serving hints were given, music in the cafeteria was suggested, new serving line and techniques were discussed for the lower cafeteria, and vending machines were installed for use during lunch and after school.

With student support, the cafeteria has been in the black for several years now.

6. COMMUNITY SERVICE

The big push was on to get the community to notice that Fairfield High School had a lot of good kids and that they were involved in positive activities. These activities included the following:

A. Visitation of retirement homes

(1) Regular Visits

(2) Adopt a Grandparent

(3) "Senior" Prom

(4) Christmas Caroling/Christmas Pin

B. Christmas Caroling at Homes of Faculty Members

C. Blood Drive

D. FCA Food Basket Project

E. Senior Class Collection of Christmas Money

F. Community Clean Up Day

G. Blue Ribbon Student Committee - Made and posted signs, tied blue ribbons all over the community, wrote letters to the editor, and made a monetary contribution to the finance committee

7. SPECIAL PROGRAMS/SCHOLARSHIPS/GIFTS

A. Special Assemblies to Acknowledge Student Achievements

B. Establishing a Formal Academic Program in the Senior Awards Night

C. Establishing the Senior Scholar Scholarship Fund - Later Replaced by the Fairfield Community Scholarship Fund

D. Recruiting Fairfield Businesses to Donate Money for Scholarships (At one time we had four business people involved in a scholarship program.)

E. Exchange Club Scholarship

F. Rotary Scholarship

G. Senior Luncheon/Cafeteria Staff

H. Spirit of Achievement - MIND BODY SPIRIT

I. Lions Club Dinner honoring the top three percent of the graduating class

J. National Honor Society Banquet

8. SETTING NEW ACTIVITIES/TRADITIONS

A. Recognition of the staff with flowers for perfect attendance, a cake or apples for National Education Week. The seniors invited staff members as their guests for the senior picnic.

B. Senior Faculty Softball and Volleyball Game

C. Senior Picnic

D. Blood Donors' Breakfast

E. Senior Bulletin Board

F. New Senior Showcase

G. Seniors paying for tickets given away to athletic events

H. Displaying of the National Honor Society banner and the list of National Honor Society members and officers

I. Lock-In

J. Graduation Practice

K. Class gifts that have meaning

L. Monetary support to the fine arts program

For the most part, we have listed the changes that the students had a part in making; however, we would be remiss if we did not mention that there were many teachers who supported the students in their efforts either at meetings or individually. Their willingness to participate in activities that often caused a laugh were good for not only the students but the faculty. Special assistance on projects whether it be art, audio visual, typing, setting up the gym for a

special program or just volunteering where there was a need, the faculty always came through.

We have related all the things we did to impact our academic climate and our total school climate. We are all aware that education has become the focus of attention over the past several years. We have been hammered from permissiveness, to back to basics, to minimum competencies. Our public wants us to do a good job - in fact, a perfect job. By what criteria should schools be judged today?

The criteria set by the U.S. Department of Education sets fourteen measurements:[2]

1. Clear Academic Goals
2. High Expectations
3. Order and Discipline
4. Rewards and Incentives for Students
5. Regular and Frequent Monitoring of Student Progress
6. Opportunities for Student Responsibility and Participation
7. Teacher "Efficacy"
8. Rewards and Incentives for Teachers
9. Concentration of Academic Learning Time
10. Positive School Climate
11. Administrative Leadership
12. Well-Articulated Curriculum
13. Evaluation for Instructional Improvement
14. Community Support

Schools have been identified across the nation to receive national recognition as among the best in the nation based on these criteria. Notice #1, academic goals; #2 high expectation, #6 opportunities for student responsibility and participation, and #10 positive school climate.

In the October, 1984 issue of the Practitioner published by the National Association of Secondary School Principals, "The Effective School" was the topic. Curricular and climate factors were given to typify effective secondary schools. Included were a clear sense of purpose, high expectation, and a sense of community.[3]

From the same report virtually all studies of effective schools conclude that effective leadership is the key to success. The three functions which represent three dimensions of instructional leadership are: (1) defining the mission of the school, (2) managing curriculum and instruction, and (3) promoting the school learning climate.

Again from the same report, the criteria of effectiveness: (1) attendance, (2) discipline (3) vandalism rates, (4) participation in co-curricular activities, (5) performance in higher-order thinking skills, (6) enrollment in higher-level academic subjects, and (7) dropout rates.

California has started a process of setting targets for every high school in the state. The state superintendent has issued report cards to every high school. The things being graded are the percentage of students who take three years of math, four years of English or three years of science, statewide test scores, dropout and attendance rates and test results on college entrance exams. Also included are the percentage of students completing two hours of homework per night and the percentage of students completing at least one writing assignment each week. Each high school in California is being charged to make improvements in these areas over the next six years. These factors are becoming the new criteria to judge an effective school.[4]

In a recent publication called A Thanksgiving Day Statement, the schools are urged to intensify their efforts to move pupils toward higher levels of learning - schools should increase academic standards. But they warned that efforts to raise the academic quality of American schools are unlikely to have

long term effect unless the schools also take major steps to develop good character in their students. Good character, they said, is not generated solely by more homework, rigorous traditional grading and better discipline. They suggested that students should more frequently be assigned group responsibility for academic and school related activities.

We believe that the key to an effective school is the right combination of strong academic expectations and a school climate that encourages students to be an integral part of and to be responsible for Fairfield being an effective school.

We would like to show you some of the things that have happened at Fairfield High School over the past few years. This is our grade card: (1) ACT scores are the highest in ten years, (2) attendance rates are the highest in fifteen years, (3) the dropout rate has been cut in half, (4) the percentage of the student body enrolled in foreign language, math, and science has increased, (5) the average number of classes taken in a six period day have increased, (6) the number of students electing to take early graduation (leave in less than four full years) has decreased, and (7) the failure rate has been reduced. (See Charts 2-8.)

We haven't solved all our problems but we are working on them. We think school climate is the key to an effective school.

References

[1]Edgar A. Kelley, Improving School Climate, National Association of Secondary School Principals, (Reston, Virginia) 1980.

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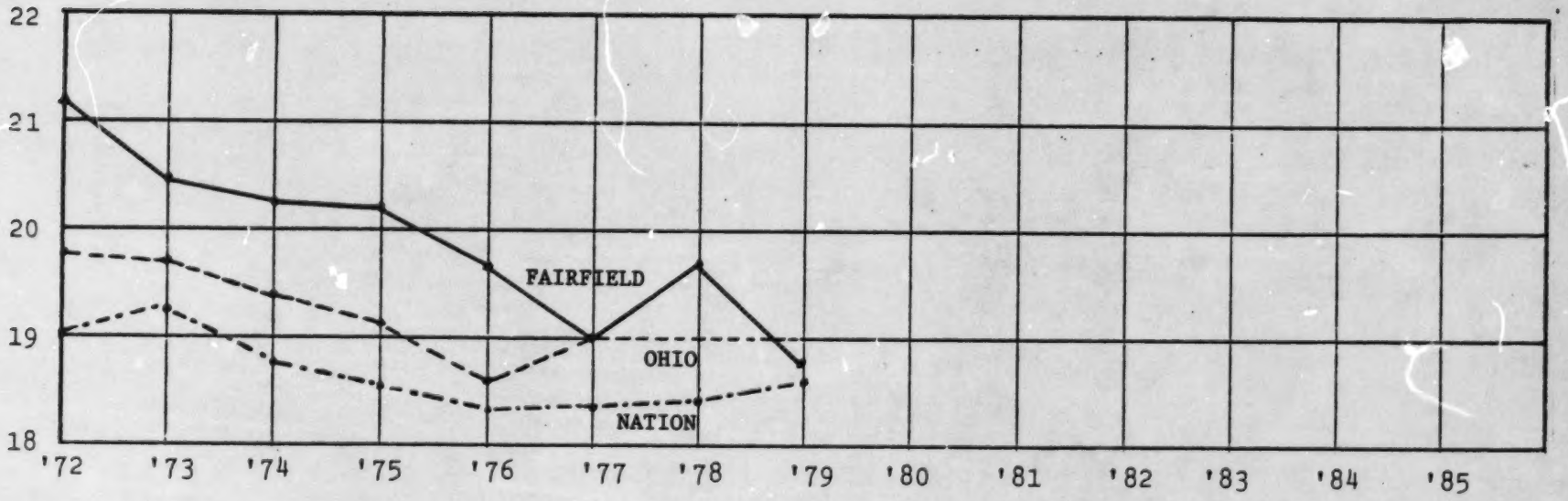
[3]Stephen K. Miller, The Effective School, The Practitioner, National Secondary School Principals, (Reston, Virginia), October 1984.

[4]Buch, Claudia, The Fresno Bee, Fresno, California, December 18, 1984.

[5]Edward A. Wynne, Developing Character: Transmitting Knowledge, Thanksgiving Statement Group, Posen, Il., November 21, 1984.

CHART 1

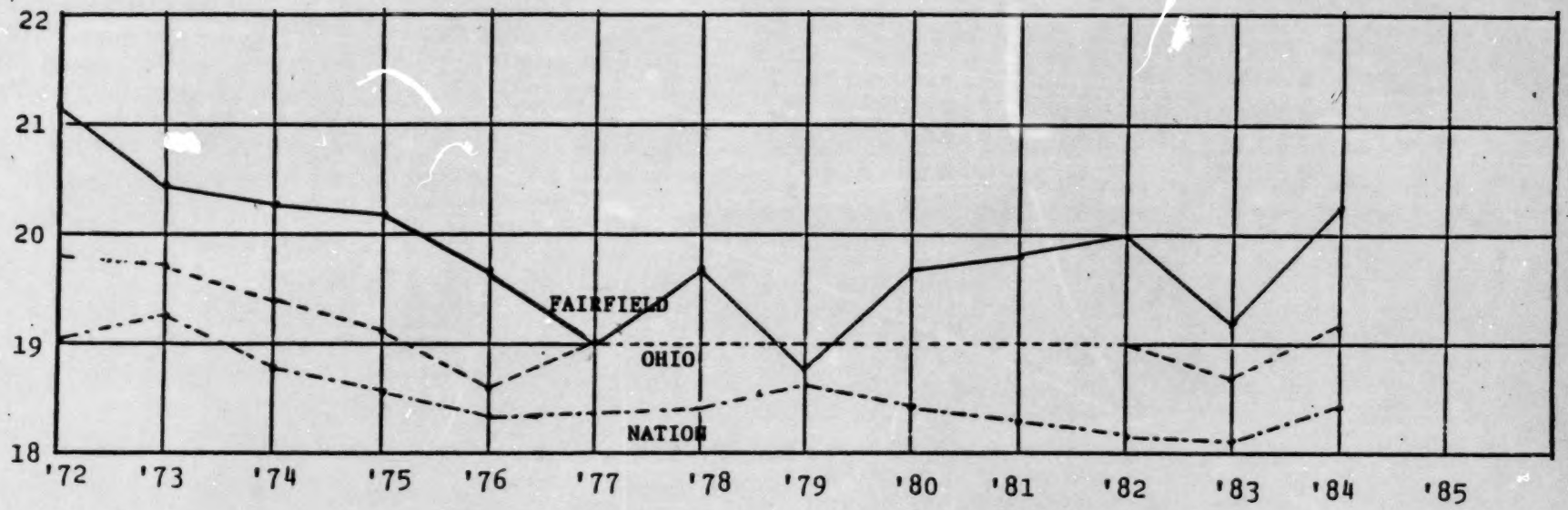
FAIRFIELD HIGH SCHOOL



COMPOSITE ACT

CHART 2

FAIRFIELD HIGH SCHOOL



COMPOSITE ACT

CHART 3

FAIRFIELD HIGH SCHOOL

ATTENDANCE

1967-68	94.4
1968-69	93.2
1969-70	93.2
1970-71	92.8
1971-72	91.8
1972-73	90.5
1973-74	91.7
1974-75	93.1
1975-76	92.1
1976-77	92.3
1977-78	90.8
1978-79	90.4
1979-80	90.9
1980-81	90.9
1981-82	91.8
1982-83	93.1
1983-84	93.7

CHART 4

FAIRFIELD CITY SCHOOLS

*DROPOUT RATE

1978-79	2.4%
1979-80	1.8%
1980-81	2.0%
1981-82	1.6%
1982-83	1.2%
1983-84	1.2%

*Total district dropouts as a percent of enrollment grades 7-12

CHART 5

FAIRFIELD HIGH SCHOOL

DEPARTMENT ENROLLMENT AS A PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL SCHOOL

	1978-79	1979-80	1980-81	1981-82	1982-83	1983-84	1984-85
FOREIGN LANGUAGE	15.2	14.4	13.4	16.0	20.2	27.0	41.0
MATH	51.7	58.7	65.0	73.8	84.4	84.1	84.5
SCIENCE	46.9	56.1	54.8	55.2	63.6	67.0	70.7

CHART 6

FAIRFIELD HIGH SCHOOL

AVERAGE NUMBER OF CLASSES

6 PERIOD DAY

1978	4.97
1979	5.06
1980	5.16
1981	5.26
1982	5.49
1983	5.36
1984	5.37

CHART 7

FAIRFIELD HIGH SCHOOL

EARLY GRADUATION

1979-80	167
1980-81	146
1981-82	118
1982-83	89
1983-84	71

CHART 8

FAIRFIELD HIGH SCHOOL

FAILURES

1984	8.2
1983	8.1
1982	7.5
1981	7.7
1980	11.4
1979	12.5
1978	11.8

These are the grades for the 1st grading period of each year.